

Ask for a Mask When Visiting Health Care Buildings

UDOH Launches New Respiratory Illness Control Effort

The Utah Department of Health (UDOH), in partnership with health organizations, hospitals and local health departments, recently launched the “Ask for a Mask” public awareness campaign in an effort to help control the spread of respiratory illness, such as influenza, in health care settings. With limited supplies of influenza vaccine in Utah, it is important that the public understand how to protect themselves and those around them from infectious diseases.

Cough, cold and flu season is here and visitors to Utah's health care offices and buildings will be asked to do their part to keep respiratory illnesses from spreading. The “Ask for a Mask” message encourages those visiting health care buildings to request a mask if they have a fever with cough or rash and to wear it for the duration of their visit. During the remainder of the cough, cold and flu season, signs and bookmarks will be posted and distributed widely in hospital and doctor's waiting rooms where the sick often expose others to their germs.

The signs and bookmarks also reinforce the basics of “respiratory etiquette” which include covering your mouth and nose every time you sneeze or cough, placing used tissues into the trash, washing hands well and often with soap and water and/or using an alcohol hand sanitizer. Of course, the first line of defense when you're sick is to stay home and away from social situations such as church, shopping, holiday gatherings, school or work. Also, consider a greeting other than a handshake to help keep germs from infecting others.

“Simple surgical masks are an effective, low-tech way to keep many respiratory illnesses from spreading in health care settings,” said Dr. Robert Rolfs, State Epidemiologist, UDOH. “Health care professionals are used to wearing masks, but this will be something new for patients or visitors to health care facilities. I urge Utahns to take these basic infection control measures to heart and do their part to help reduce the spread of respiratory illnesses.”

Masks have been shown to be an effective way to limit the spread of respiratory diseases. Respiratory diseases can be spread to others from tiny droplets that exit the nose or mouth of an infected person when they cough, sneeze or talk. The common cold, flu, whooping cough, chicken pox, measles, rubella and



SARS are all examples of diseases that can be spread by droplets in the air. Fever with a cough or rash are common symptoms of these diseases.

The UDOH is pleased that so many partners have stepped forward to take part in the “Ask for a Mask” public awareness message. Facilities belonging to IASIS Health Care, Intermountain Health Care, MountainStar Health Care, the University of Utah Medical Center, VA Salt Lake City Health Care System and Night-time Urgent Care Clinics will all be posting the helpful message and be providing masks. All 12 local health departments in Utah are also participating.

What is influenza (the flu)?

Influenza, commonly called “the flu,” is a contagious disease caused by the influenza virus, which infects the respiratory tract (nose, throat, lungs). The flu is different from a cold. The flu usually comes on suddenly and may include these symptoms:

- Fever
- Headache
- Body aches
- Fatigue (can be extreme)
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Nasal congestion

How soon will I get sick if I am exposed and how long am I contagious?

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about 1-4 days. The flu typically lasts for 7-10 days. Adults may be contagious from 1 day prior to becoming sick and for 3-7 days after they first develop symptoms. Some children may be contagious for longer than a week.